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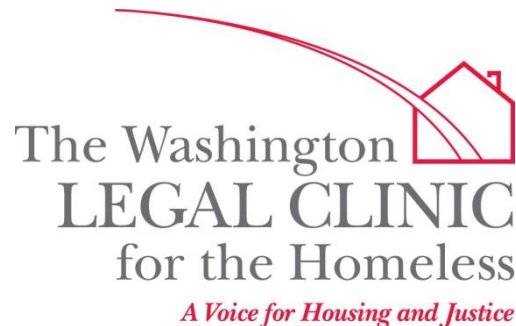
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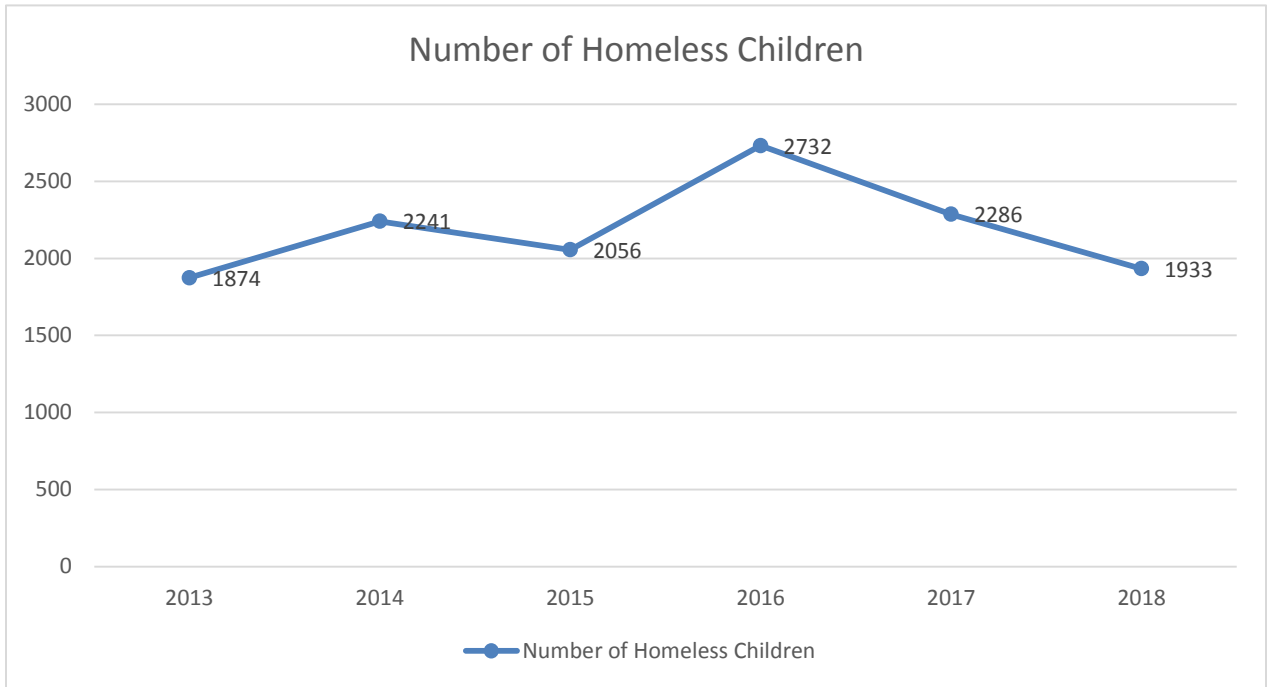


Testimony before the Committee on Human Services
Oversight Hearing on the Department of Human Services
and the Interagency Council on Homelessness
Amber W. Harding
March 1, 2019

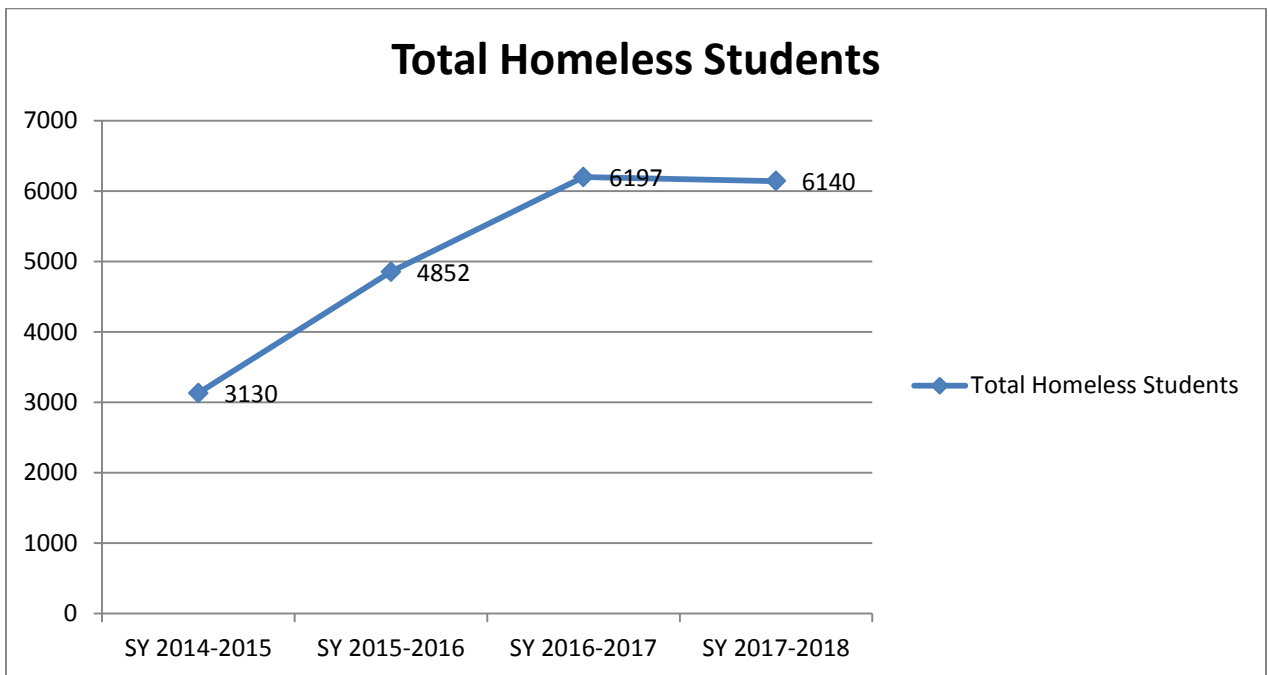
Good morning Councilmember Nadeau and members of the Committee. My name is Amber Harding and I am an attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. The Legal Clinic envisions – and since 1987 has worked towards – a just and inclusive community for all residents of the District of Columbia, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive.

Recently, Director Zeilinger sent out a message to stakeholders giving some updates on family homelessness and services. In it, she mentioned that the agency would be reducing its motel usage because “over the last three years, we have seen sustained progress towards reducing the number of families experiencing homelessness.” Reducing family homelessness is a laudable goal, one that we share. But reducing shelter usage does not necessarily equate to reducing family homelessness. Policies and practices that are primarily aimed at reducing shelter usage without considering the impact on reducing homelessness may result in increased trauma and instability for families.

When the Mayor or DHS speak of progress on ending family homelessness, they are referring to the numbers derived from the HUD Point in Time count. For families, that count generally tracks families staying on the street, in emergency shelters or transitional housing. It does not count families who are doubled up, who move from night to night, who steer clear of anyone who might count them in laundromats, emergency rooms, hallways, abandoned buildings, with abusers, etc. It does not count families turned away from shelters. It does not count families in Rapid Re-housing, even though their assistance is time limited. It does not count families “diverted” to homelessness prevention if they have even one night to stay somewhere. The Point in Time Count does show that the numbers of homeless children in shelter and transitional housing has gone down 30% since 2015—to 1933 homeless children in 2018.



But other DC agency numbers show family homelessness rising, not going down. The number of homeless children in DC’s schools has increased 26% since 2015, doubled since 2014.¹ And even those numbers undercount the true number of homeless children since they do not count children who do not attend school, most significantly any child under three years old, or any child who, due to stigma or another reason, does not self-identify as homeless. In 2018, more than three times the number of children counted in the Point in Time count were experiencing homelessness in DC schools—6140 children. That means there were 4207 children experiencing homelessness in our schools who were not counted in the 2018 Point and Time count.



¹ From OSSE performance oversight responses to Committee on Education

Family homelessness is not decreasing-- family shelter usage is. The vast majority of homeless children in DC are not receiving shelter or transitional housing services. For some of those children, they may be safely doubled up with a family member or friend. They may be receiving prevention services and will never need to enter shelter. But at the Legal Clinic we hear almost every day from families who are experiencing tremendous trauma and instability because of policies and practices aimed not at ending their homelessness, but at preventing them from entering shelter. Reducing shelter usage is not something that the Department of Human Services should celebrate if family homelessness is on the rise—it literally just means more and more families are being denied a lifesaving public benefit.

The 4207 kids who are homeless but without shelter are all but invisible to policymakers. All strategies and tactics surround keeping them out of shelter, not ending their homelessness. Having a reduction in family shelter usage as the ultimate goal creates intense pressure for intake and prevention workers to err on the side of denying shelter, not on the side of the safety or well-being of the family.²

Here are some of the policies and practices we have learned about from our clients that serve to reduce shelter usage but not end family homelessness:³

- Closing a family shelter before full replacement capacity is available (this reduced family shelter capacity without ending homelessness)
- Requiring families to split up in order to receive services (denying or discouraging fathers from joining their families, encouraging applicants to place their children with a family member and enter single shelter instead, etc)
- Denying every family who has even one night of a place to go, even if they will be right back the next day
- Failing to provide families any notice denying them shelter if they get referred to prevention services instead, reducing the ability of clients to appeal and the agency to catch mistakes
- Denying families with adult dependent children with disabilities
- Forcing families who have lived outside of DC to prove that they cannot move back to that jurisdiction, even if they have already proved DC residency

² Even in rapid re-housing conversations, DHS frames the success of the program only in how well it prevents families from coming back to shelter, not in how stable the families are at the end of the subsidy.

³ All of these are consistent and regular practices that multiple clients have reported. In addition, we have received reports of incidents of intake workers telling people there is no room in shelter; hotline workers refusing to process or transport families when they call, or telling families that they don't think families have a right to shelter; staff being disrespectful or rude to families and then, when they get upset, either calling the police or saying that the family "withdrew" their application; telling families in prevention that, if they go to shelter, they will have to start all over in the housing process or that they will not get any housing assistance; and telling families they aren't eligible for shelter if they have been in Rapid Re-housing.

- Requiring families to provide the lease of every place they have stayed to prove that they are not on that lease, even if they do not have access to those documents and there is no reason to believe they were ever on the lease
- Forbidding families from returning to Virginia Williams Family Resource Center if they are receiving prevention services
- Allowing families to sleep in doorways, hallways, cars, units with no utilities, with abusers, etc. while the agency forces them to bring back document after document after document, instead of using the Interim Eligibility system to provide safety to the family

A system focused nearly exclusively on reducing shelter usage, not ending family homelessness, will result in a system that increases trauma and instability, with long-term consequences. For the children who are separated from their parents, who are under tremendous stress not knowing where they will be from night to night, who are witnessing violence and illegal activity, who may be abused or assaulted by extended family, friends or strangers... there are profound repercussions on their mental health, their ability to learn in school, and their trajectory in life.

Director Zeilinger, when commenting on her decision to terminate the contract of Life Deeds, the Ward 7 DC General replacement shelter provider said: "We always need to strike a balance between ensuring our controls are tight and that we're not creating a system that's hard to work with [or is] cumbersome, to discourage great organizations from working with us."⁴ What if families were given that same grace?

DC must drastically shift course and re-center its goals on ending family homelessness, not lowering shelter usage. When that becomes the goal, then hopefully the emphasis will shift to programs and policies that support the stability and well-being of *all* children and parents experiencing homelessness in this city.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer questions.

⁴ <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21048815/dc-terminates-contract-with-ward-7-homeless-shelter-provider>